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Attendance Woes Get Worse

As Yogi Berra is purported to have said, “If people don’t come to the games, you can’t stop them”. Unfortunately for the Pittsburgh Pirates, that has become an all too painful reality. After nine home games this season, the Pirates have drawn just over 16,000 fans per game. And excluding the near full house on opening night, attendance has averaged less than 14,000. This represents a 52 percent drop from the level posted during the comparable eight-game stretch of 2001, the team’s first year at PNC Park.

Pittsburgh’s attendance ranks 29th out of the 30 major league franchises with only the hapless Montreal Expos attracting fewer fans. Unless there is a massive turnaround in the attendance picture, which appears unlikely in light of poor season ticket sales, the Pirates are headed for a 2004 attendance of 1.3 million. In 2003, the team drew 1.6 million, down from 1.8 million in 2002 and 2.4 million in 2001. The trend is clearly downward and at current levels is comparable to the lackluster seasons at Three Rivers Stadium.

Obviously, the novelty of PNC Park has worn off quickly. The Pirates’ attendance now reflects the fact that compared to many major league cities Pittsburgh is not a baseball town. This was well known when the new ballpark was built, but proponents assured us that all the team needed was a new baseball-only park to get a large sustainable increase in attendance. Now at tremendous cost to taxpayers, the new ballpark is not stimulating the promised economic growth in Pittsburgh and has failed to lift the team out of its financial difficulties. Indeed, the City is worse off and the Pirates’ are no better off than they were before the new ballpark was built.

The new ballpark argument has been thoroughly discredited as 2003 and 2004 attendance figures show. Of the five weakest drawing teams this year, all but Montreal have fairly new stadiums. Detroit, Milwaukee, Cleveland and Pittsburgh all lag far behind St. Louis which plays its games in a nearly 40 year old park that is a virtual twin of the now demolished Three Rivers Stadium. There goes the notion that baseball fans will care more about a ballpark than the team on the field.

The Pirates’ problems are being compounded by the City’s hefty increase in the parking tax that has added more cost to those attending games. Still the fact that only 8,800 tickets were sold for a recent game, points to a lack of regional interest in the team. And, the much-ballyhooed salary dumping efforts during last season have probably convinced

many fair weather fans that the team is giving up on being a serious contender for the foreseeable future.

Ticket sales--the method used to measure attendance--does not capture actual attendance, which is often much lower due to no-shows. Restaurants, bars and other retailers depending on game day clientele are undoubtedly seeing much less business than they had hoped for based on attendance levels in prior years. What we are seeing in Pittsburgh is the ultimate shafting of the taxpayer. Despite the voters good sense in rejecting money for the new ballpark, elected officials and authority leaders rammed the project through by making outrageous and unsupportable claims of the great financial benefits that would flow from the new, architecturally delightful facility.

The shame is that the leadership of the RAD Board, the Sports and Exhibition Authority and much of the City's civic groups have learned nothing from this fiasco and would undoubtedly repeat the same mistakes if given the opportunity.

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